Sojourn of the Sylvan Fringe: Receptivity to Mystery and Curricular Ruminations

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Abstract:
This retrospective of an extended inquiry into the phenomenon of mystery addresses three questions:

1. *What is mystery?*, revealing through hermeneutic phenomenology an unknown flower within a forest resuscitating metaphysics as *physis*, a definition of mystery founded on secrecy and incomprehensibility, and a conception of mystery as the enigma of the counterplay between the ontological movements of presencing and absencing (Caputo, 1986; Heidegger, 1927/1962);
2. *Why distain toward mystery?*, where, through a literature review, a typology of *senses of mystery* problematizes this distain and expands awareness towards mystery. Openness to mystery begins through awareness, which heightens the senses and emotions, kindling poetic knowledge, a foundational mode of being. Mystery also serves as a measure for our lives, through our consonant comportments and conceptions. The comportment of humility, among others, is highlighted as nurturing mystery; and
3. *How may receptivity toward mystery inform curriculum theory?*, where the consideration of "what should be learned" (Petrina, 2004), supports a conception of education in which future generations recognize metaphysics as presence, while awakening to metaphysics as *physis*.

Keywords: mystery; existential experience; hermeneutic phenomenology; sojourn; sylvan fringe; metaphysics; ontology; epistemology; *physis*; presence and absence; receptivity to mystery; curriculum theory; ontological curriculum

Séjour en lisière forestière : Réceptivité au mystère et réflexions curriculaires

Résumé :
Cette rétrospective d'une enquête approfondie sur le phénomène du mystère aborde trois questions :

1. *Qu'est-ce que le mystère?,* révélant à travers la phénoménologie herméneutique une fleur inconnue au sein d'une forêt ressuscitant la métaphysique comme *physis*, une définition du mystère fondée sur le secret et l'incompréhensibilité, et une conception du mystère comme l'énigme du contre-jeu entre les mouvements ontologiques de présence et d'absence (Caputo, 1986 ; Heidegger, 1927/1962);
2. *Pourquoi dédaigner le mystère?,* où, à travers une revue de la littérature, une typologie des sens du mystère problématise ce dédain et élargit la conscience du mystère. L'ouverture au mystère commence par la conscience, qui exacerbe les sens et les émotions, allumant la connaissance poétique, un mode d'être fondamental. Le mystère sert aussi de mesure à nos vies, à travers nos comportements et nos conceptions consonantiques. Le comportement d'humilité, entre autres, est mis en évidence comme nourrissant le mystère; et
3. *Comment la réceptivité au mystère peut-elle éclairer la théorie de curriculum?,* où la considération de « ce qui devrait être appris » (Petrina, 2004), soutient une conception de l'éducation dans laquelle les générations futures prennent conscience de la métaphysique comme présence, tout en découvrant la métaphysique comme *physis*.

Mots clés : mystère; expérience existentielle; phénoménologie herméneutique; séjour; lisière forestière; métaphysique; ontologie; épistémologie; *physis*; présence et absence; réceptivité au mystère; théorie du curriculum; curriculum ontologique

The purpose of our essay is to bring philosophical clarity to the phenomenon of mystery, to explore how mystery may inform curriculum theory and to provide a retrospective of our research collaboration into the phenomenon of mystery across three time periods. Our work is imbued with an ethos of environmentalism. This philosophic inquiry into the phenomenon of mystery is inspired by three questions: *What is mystery?*; *Why distain for mystery?*; and *How may receptivity to mystery inform curriculum theory?*

The research questions speak to three time periods and inquiries, a chronology which involved the authors in different arrangements, as reflected in the authorial voices of the sections of this paper:

- Period A: The Early Years (written in first-person singular), when Doug Karrow, first chanced upon mystery as a potential phenomenon of inquiry. The research methodology adopted in this section is rooted in interpretivism, with an orienting research design that borrows from the philosophical tradition of hermeneutical phenomenology, Heidegger's distinct brand of interpretive description. With the tradition of interpretivism and subjectivity at the fore, the inquiry also considers the contribution of immediate, embodied experience to the methodology.
- Period B: The Middle Years (written in first-person singular and plural), an ensuing collaboration of Doug Karrow and Sharon Harvey. Sharon's familiarity with the works of Heidegger has significantly extended Doug's initial work into a joint investigation regarding historical attitudes and senses of mystery. Philosophical inquiry is used here and in the balance of our work, such that it: a) is a reflective and/or a meditative activity; b) seeks clarification and understanding rather than binding axioms and truths; c) takes as its starting point the language used to describe and explain different aspects of experience; and d) achieves its goals by challenging underlying assumptions (Stubley, 1992/2021).
- Period C: The Contemporary Years (written in—and directed to—first person plural), our current philosophic inquiry. Our prior inquiries bring us to a consideration of how the phenomenon of mystery may inform curriculum theory in its address to our common human existence. Within the final discussion of this essay, we summarize conclusions across the three periods of research and consider implications of this work, while anticipating future research.

Period A: Early Years—What Is Mystery?

(Doug Karrow)

The Sojourn

I live in rural Ontario on a fifth-generation farm, on the land which my ancestors cleared and homesteaded. I am keenly aware of the metaphysical significance land has on oneself, one's family and one's community. This land hasn't always been "ours". It is part of the ancestral land of the Anishinaabeg[1] taken by the British Crown, incentivized for colonization early during the 1800s. By

[1] And I echo this statement of Fernandes (2021): "We acknowledge with respect, the history, spirituality, and culture of the Anishinaabeg, Six Nations of the Grand River, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat-Wyandot-Wyandotte peoples on whose traditional territories we gather and whose ancestors signed Treaties with our ancestors. We recognize also,

"incentivized" I mean British families were promised "free" tracts of land in the colony, as long as they cleared the land of its forests. Like most southern Ontario farms, cleared land is front and foremost on the approach, while a small forest or "bush" is relegated to the rear of the farm property. Such "relegation", as a minimum, provides a psychological and physical separation between the homestead and the forest for the homesteader. This "separation" or boundary attests to the role forests have played in developing human civilization, persisting in the cultural imagination of my ancestors. "From the beginning [forests appeared] to our ancestors as archaic, as antecedent to the human world; . . . the forests were *first*" (Harrison, 1992, p. 1). To this day, small tracts of forest that remain across the farms of southern Ontario, are strategically located toward the rear of the farm. While they served various practical economic purposes (fuel from firewood, maple syrup from maple trees, lumber from timber), their relegation to the far reaches of the farm ensured their physical and psychological separation (as forests inevitably regrow and creep into agricultural land, and scars of the psychological and physical toll it took to clear the land of them remain deeply entrenched).

The trees of our forest are as diverse in age as they are in species. This is largely because my ancestors spared them from the axe of clear-cutting and the mandibles of grazers (e.g., livestock). Many of the deciduous trees within this forest are over 150-200 years old; some were here well before my ancestors cleared the land. A particular feature of the forest, its *sylvan fringe*,[2] consists of a border separating field from forest where mediations between light and dark, silence and sound, saturation and desiccation, and a host of other intermediaries, resides. The sylvan fringe is a profound place to explore our ecological relationship with nature. This is a boundary place (Brown & Toadvine, 2003), a liminal space (Karrow, 2010), a place of transition and transformation. The sylvan fringe within the forest provides the setting and the anchor for this inquiry.

The Encounter

One day, traversing this sylvan fringe, I discovered an unusual forest flower along my frequent and well-trodden path. Here is my narrative of that experience:

> Within the familiar resides the unfamiliar ready to delight and astound us. It is rare that I don't discover something unusual during my daily hikes. Today was particularly special. Walking through the forest along my usual path I came upon a small unobtrusive flower. It did not have the distinctive qualities of other spring blossoms I have come to know and see almost daily during spring. Two delicate pink and white flowers, just blossoming, hang gingerly from a stem rising slightly and erectly above the dark green monocot leaves, drooping star-like around the plant. I scan the forest floor to see if other plants of its kind can be found to no avail. Curious I lie down. Now at eye level I see the flowers are that of what appears to be an orchid. It does not resemble either one of the two other orchid species that find refuge at our farm. I examine

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the Métis and Inuit whose ancestors shared this land and these waters. May we all, as Treaty People, live with respect on this land, and live in peace and friendship with all its diverse peoples" (n.p.).

[2] Sylvan is derived from the Roman god Silvius, who was born in the forest or "of the forests". By the 16th century, sylvan referred to wooded or forested land (Harrison, 1992, p. 47). From my immediate first-hand experience, I know there is a gradual transition between a field (cleared land) and the depth of a forest. This I refer to as the "sylvan fringe".

> it in detail, carefully considering whether it fits in with the categories of my knowledge and experience. It does only to the extent that I believe it is an orchid. It has the general shape and appearance of such a flower. The veins of its leaves are distinctly parallel. It has no fragrance. The setting is conducive—damp, shady, spacious. The discovery of a new species of orchid excites me. It preoccupies my mind. This is truly an encounter with mystery. I feel compelled by this excitement to know the orchid more thoroughly. What is its genus? Is it indigenous? How did it get there? Why is it the only one of its kind? The questions come fully and unhindered. (Karrow, 2010, pp. 131-132)

Figure 1. *Unknown Flower.*
Photograph, a composite of separate images of the flower, taken and used by courtesy of J. Reaume.

No Simple Questions

The experience turned out to be anything but routine. A series of questions followed—beginning with, *What is this strange flower?*—revealing how I thought, what I thought I understood, and how I saw myself in relation to the world. Traversing the sylvan fringe revealed something strange and unfamiliar—an encounter with *mystery*. This led to another deceivingly simple question, *What is mystery?* Resisting answering that question, upon further reflection I began to notice that in the field of education, our desire and preoccupation with knowledge has been commonly expressed through distain for mystery. And this led to yet another question, *Why distain for mystery?*

Marginalizing mystery, through the closure of knowledge, is a common tendency, deliberate or otherwise. The founding disciplines of Western academics (theology, philosophy and science) each

have a relationship with mystery. Some, such as science, tend to "deny" mystery; others, such as theology, more often revere it (these are over-simplifications but, as tendencies, are instructive, nevertheless). In general, within societal discourse there is a tendency to *demystify* reality. Jones (2009) observes:

> There is very little sense of mystery today in philosophy. The same holds true for Western theology: conservatives think the answers have been revealed, and liberals downplay the transcendent in general and ignore any mysteries surrounding it. And in the sciences one does not advance one's career by looking at the "big questions". (p. 5)

What is Mystery?

Cooper (2002) suggests our attempts at defining mystery present a paradox. To try to explain or utter the "ineffable", (Cooper, 2002, p. 286) defeats the very meaning of the word itself.[3] Nonetheless, common to all senses of mystery are the characteristics that mystery is *secret* and *incomprehensible*. The English etymological meaning of mystery implies "secrecy" (Verkamp, 1997). Further back, references to ancient *Eleusinian* mystery rites supplied through the Greek verb *muein* provide an original context. Initiates (*mystai*) were to close their eyes before viewing sacred objects and afterward to keep secret what they had seen. *Muein* literally meant "to shut the eyes and mouth" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2003). The second common element to the various senses of mystery is that mystery is *incomprehensible*. This is implied within the first understanding of mystery as secret—because to affirm that there is something either "within" or "beyond" or "other than" nature that is "hidden", and perhaps will always remain so, is also to suggest that it is beyond human comprehension (Verkamp, 1997). One is clearly unable to understand something that is beyond one's grasp. Now that I have put forth a general *definition* of mystery as comprising elements of secrecy and incomprehensibility, I turn my attention to a source of inspiration for its *conceptualization*.

Many contours of mystery exist and a partial acknowledgment should recognize that they draw from a variety of disciplines and metaphors. Differentiation between Eastern and Western metaphysics (the study of the nature of being) resides in where *being* or a *thing* is believed to originate. Whereas Eastern traditions make no distinction between mystery (qua no-being or no-thing) and being (thing), Western traditions do. For example, the Eastern religious philosophy of Daoism supports that *dao* (that which makes beings) is "not separated from them by any border" (Cooper, 2018, p. 14). Likewise, Mahayana Buddhism asserts that the world of things does not exist independently of an ineffable source, font, or well-spring. "The world is given to us . . . but not by any [transcendentally separate] giver" (Cooper, 2018, p. 14). In contrast, Western metaphysical traditions, whether Christian or atheist, believe that an entity, whether divine or unknown, is responsible for creating things from no-thing. Critiquing this Christian Western tradition, the existential philosopher Martin Heidegger (1927/1962) recovered a pre-Socratic conception of mystery, rooted in the Greek

[3] In short, we cannot describe mystery per se, but we can describe the concept of mystery.

word for nature, or *physis*.[4] To get at this rather unfamiliar word for nature, we gather and benefit from an aphorism of Heidegger (1959/1966), who asserts, "that which shows itself and at the same time withdraws is the essential trait of what we call the mystery" (p. 55). Caputo (1986) re-interprets this, writing, "mystery is the enigma of the counterplay" (p. 83). And, Nicholson (2019) adds, "mystery generally does not merely mean something unknown, but rather something in some way known but that hides its truth and awakens our questing" (p. 67). Together, Heidegger (1959/1966), Caputo (1986) and Nicholson (2019) help us gain access to this pre-Socratic notion of nature as *physis* and the complexity of its complicit ontological movements (of revealing and concealing). *Physis* is mysterious as that force of nature that has the inherent possibility of unconcealing, while yet concealing through its unconcealment. *Physis* provides the inspiration for our work. However, some background on metaphysics, or the study of the nature of being, is required to fully appreciate why mystery might be worth pondering and why such an ancient conception of mystery might be informative.

Recall, metaphysics is the study and theorization of being. Throughout human history, metaphysics has varied. Today metaphysics as *presence* dominates humans, non-humans, our world and, to great extent, the earth. Metaphysics as presence is a belief that being continually presences, that being exists always according to a particular way it comes forth, a particular way it comes to be revealed by some-thing. Increasingly, cautioned Heidegger (1954/1977), the manner all beings come to be is through technology—that, on a minor scale, the modern technological tools with which one engages with our world cause all beings to be, but too, on a major scale, the gross technological character of society causes all beings to be. The particular manner by which "causing of beings" occurs is through metaphysics as presence. Heidegger refers to this as *enframing* and the unique manner enframing exerts its effect on humans is called the *Gestell* (Heidegger, 1927/1962; 1954/1977; 1953/2000). Beings come to be in a way that exhausts their potential for other ways of being. The unique yet all-encompassing nature of technology reveals beings in a way that is aggressive, coercive and exhausting. In Western culture, being has come to be viewed increasingly as an object of human contrivance, a resource: consumable, manipulatable, storable, harvestable, transformable, exchangeable, commodifiable and capitalizable. But metaphysics has not always been this way. Ancient pre-Socratic metaphysics, founded within nature or *physis*, is radically different. It preserves the potential of a being to be in various ways, resisting the determination and reduction of modern technology. Such a metaphysics founded on *physis* preserves "presencing" and "absencing"; a being's beingness and non-beingness. Where, again, does mystery fit in?

Recall Heidegger's retrieval of the ancient Greek word for nature, *physis* and its equating with mystery, granted by Caputo (1986) as "enigma" (p. 83). Inherent to *physis* are the two movements of being—presencing and absencing. In metaphysics, these are commonly referred to as ontological

[4] *Physis* (phusis) is the Greek word for nature. The ancient understanding of nature is different from that of modern day. Whereas modern day understandings of nature are founded on "objectness" or "thereness" (in accord with metaphysics of presence), the ancient view of nature incorporated metaphysics as presence *and* absence. *Physis* is complicit in a tree: over-simplistically, the branches are what is "present", and the roots are what is "absent". Heidegger's re-interpretation of *physis* draws from the ancient Greeks, however other interpretations of *physis* exist.

movements or epochs (Heidegger, 1953/2000; Taylor, 2007). Previously, we characterized metaphysics as presence. In contrast, metaphysics as absence (as withholding or concealing) "is not to be understood as the negative of unconcealment but is a positive source of unconcealment: . . . darkness, chaos, absence, ambiguity, the play of change; . . . nature too, speaks of concealment" (Bigwood, 1993, p. 36). Mystery is larger than metaphysics as absence. Mystery is the "enigma" of the *counterplay between conjoined ontological movements (unconcealing and concealing)*, expressed through the conjoined metaphysical movements of presence *and* absence.

Revisiting the Encounter

During my transits through the sylvan fringe, I came to interpret these existential experiences in the following way.[5] The actual encounter with the strange flower, growing within the sylvan fringe, furthered my thinking about transitions and boundaries: between field and forest. Traversing this region liberated the imaginative play of thought through body.

> The sylvan fringe mediates each of these occupancies—day and night, knowledge and mystery, light and dark—allowing free-flow and passage between one and the other. Toward the field we've become conditioned to equate knowing with what appears. And toward the forest we've been conditioned to associate mystery with what is concealed. But as I've tried to demonstrate we can know in ways that don't always privilege presence; too, we can celebrate mystery beyond surrendering to absence. Knowledge is more than what is present or the actual, it also entails possibility, which falls within the domain of absence. Likewise, mystery encompasses that which is absent, while actualizing presence. This realization underscores the relationship between each of the binary pairs—each *is* because of the *other.* As such, the binaries gradually dissolve, absorbed entirely by the between-ness of the sylvan fringe. Knowledge and mystery must coexist if each is to be fully recognized, however this is not the case today. Knowledge has subverted the mysterious and we have become blinded by its effects. Rekindling the mysterious within our lives would awaken other bodily senses. Attuning ourselves to our bodies and all our sensate capacities, would, I believe rekindle the mysterious. (Karrow, 2010, p. 160)

Nuance (from the French, *nuer,* to show light and shade, ultimately from Latin *nubes* meaning cloud), etymologically and conceptually helps us move imaginatively beyond the binary-ordained world of our construction (Hanks, 1979, p. 1054). Nuance, conceptually, is suggestive of equivocity. It offers the possibility of bringing together the binary formulations that characterize our time. And it does so in a way that does not admonish one binary for the other, or subvert one over the other, or envelop both, but rather it holds each binary together on equal footing. Nuance guides and shapes all else that follows; however, my daily wanderings to and from our forest took on another quality. I came to understand these existential[6] excursions within the vicinity of the sylvan fringe through the

[5] These walks and reflections upon them occurred over a period of a year. Transits across the sylvan fringe were interspersed with reading, thought, reflection and writing.
[6] Existential here refers to an immediate experience we have with our surroundings that reveals something to us.

sojourn. While nuance is the principle at play allowing us to negotiate both extremes of the binary positions, it is the sojourn that nuance is predicated upon:

> Within nuance the dynamic of sojourn is at play. Sojourn conveys the idea of a temporary stay yet always dynamic in its course. It derives from the Latin *sub* meaning during and the Late Latin *diurnum* meaning day (Hanks, 1979, p. 1450). A literal translation gives us that which we occupy during a day. But it is the dynamic quality of the word sojourn that helps us here. Transiting the sylvan fringe, I found myself moving back and forth between the mystery of the forest, toward the brilliantly lit knowledge of the clearing. Back and forth I would go one day to the next. It was this daily sojourn that captured my imagination and helped me feel the sway of another way of being. I came to understand that nuance depended upon the dynamic interplay of the sojourn. Sojourn reflects the idea that educating is not simply the pursuit and residence of knowledge—*what we would occupy during a day*. Rather sojourn mimics the dynamic sway of *physis* through its temporality and in doing so demonstrates a way of being-in-the-world. We must depart and seek the unknown and become aware of its sourcing in order to appreciate the knowledge that is granted to us. (Karrow, 2010, p. 115)

The metaphor of the sojourn shaped my thinking in profound ways. Appreciating the mystery through the knowledge and the knowledge deriving from mystery, either way, allows for an enrichment of experience exceeding that sequestered through a journeying outward only toward the clearing. Our best efforts at arriving remain approximations at best. "Mystery is the constancy of departure and knowledge the approximation of arrival" (Karrow, 2010, p. 95). The sojourn through the sylvan fringe furthered my thinking on the relationship between our understanding of reality with our comprehension of the world's knowledge as never complete or final; always remaining an "approximation of arrival" and, concordantly, any experience of mystery the "constancy of departure".

Our modern quest for knowledge has become an endeavour to dismiss the existence of mystery. This need not be the case. As I have tried to demonstrate, mystery and knowledge are both essential to our understanding of the world about us. Knowledge and mystery are co-constituted. A complete irreverence toward mystery for the sake of knowledge partially explains the predicament we find ourselves in today—the wholesale displacement from our earth, increasingly the world and, insidiously, ourselves.

With this dense description of mystery's "contours" and its relationship with metaphysics, this inquiry moves to an examination of various senses of mystery and their ontological and epistemological origins, in doing so, addressing the question, *Why distain for mystery?*

Period B: Middle Years—Why Distain Toward Mystery?

(Doug Karrow with Sharon Harvey)

Typology of Senses of Mystery

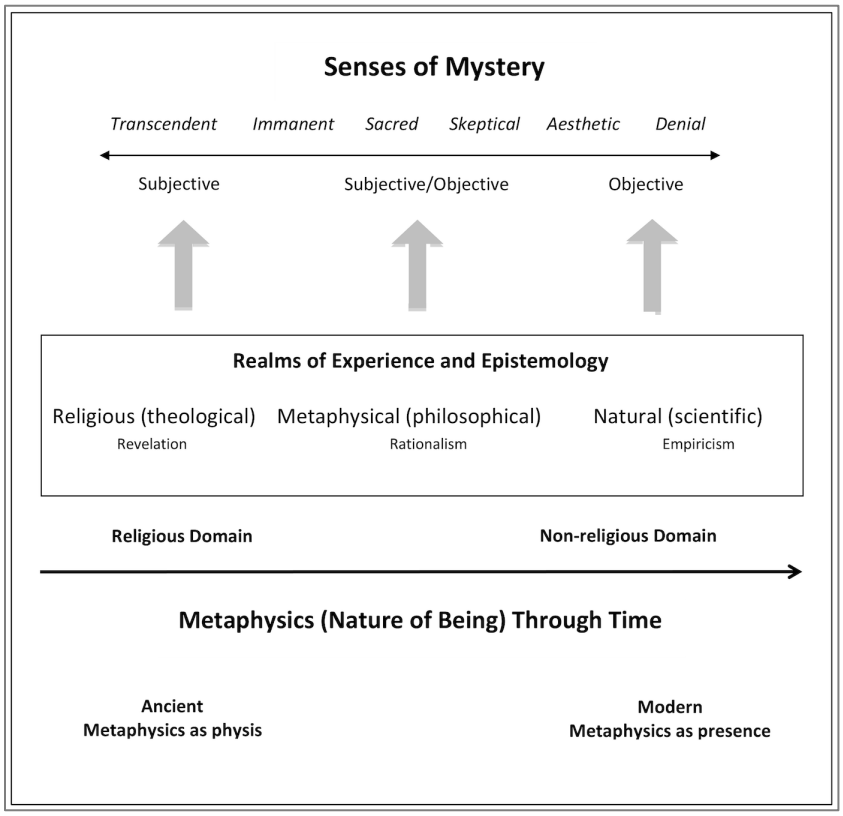

Figure 2. *Typology of senses of mystery with respect to metaphysics, domains, realms of experience and epistemology, and subjective/objective relationships.* Note: This figure is an assemblage of our own creation, inspired by the works of Verkamp (2002, 1997), Jones (2009), Cooper (2002, 2018) and Taylor (2007).

The typology of senses of mystery depicted in Figure 2 was generated after two extensive literature reviews that my colleague Sharon and I conducted on the topic (Karrow & Harvey, 2015; Harvey & Karrow, 2016). At the bottom of the figure, a bold horizontal line anchors the figure, portraying a metaphysical timeline (the nature of being or the ontological). Toward the left, metaphysics as *physis* marks a distant reach into history; toward the right, metaphysics as presence more currently predominates.[7] Just above the time continuum are the religious and non-religious domains, an overly simple categorization separating theological from non-theological understandings of our world. These are further historically categorized, by religious, metaphysical and scientific realms of experience—the primary ways we, as humans, throughout history, have engaged in the world through culturally mediated sense-making disciplines. Sub-tending each realm

[7] Metaphysics as *physis* corresponds with ancient society and metaphysics as presence, modern society. In its most contemporary form, metaphysics as presence manifests through technology.

is the primary epistemology at play, respectively: revelation, rationalism and empiricism. Again, the time continuum traces the historical relationship between realms of experience and their related epistemologies. These realms each give rise to various senses of mystery. It should be clarified that the term "senses of mystery" derives from the language of the *senses* and assumes, on the part of the individual experiencing mystery, "certain faculties" but also, "the perceptual awareness and/or feeling resulting therefrom" (Verkamp, 2002, p. xii). True to the terminology invoked by Verkamp, we retain the term "senses of mystery", acknowledging they are awkward and obscure. Another word that might help clarify our intention is *attitudes* toward mystery. Our "senses" or "attitudes" toward mystery result in our perceptions and feelings of the unknown. Each sense (or attitude) reflects a relationship between object and subject, illustrated by a continuum underneath the Senses of Mystery title. The degree to which the subject or object prevails tends to reflect a certain attitude or sense of mystery. For example, a transcendent or immanent sense of mystery derives from a theological realm of experience, epistemologically reverential. At the other end of the spectrum of senses of mystery are the aesthetic and denied senses of mystery, products of metaphysics and scientific realms of experience with rationalism and empiricism as the dominant epistemologies.[8] For our purposes, the typology can identify the sense of mystery at play in that initial encounter with the "unknown flower".

Mystery as Denial (Science)

As a scientist by academic training and a science educator by profession, my initial engagement with the unknown flower was an attempt to identify and classify it—to bring the other into the fold of my-self. I, Doug, immediately resorted to scientific discourse and methods to do this. After unsuccessfully attempting to make the flower "known", I realized this presented a unique opportunity to examine the phenomenon of mystery itself. Without realizing it at the time, I was demonstrating my own receptivity to a sense of mystery, albeit mystery as "denied" (Figure 2; see also Kidd, 2012). Heidegger gave me licence to deliberately resist adopting a sense of mystery as denial, by refusing to identify and name the unknown flower. Setting aside this desire to know, while enjoying the positive emotional responses that inevitably result from an encounter with mystery, such as wonder and it correlates, curiosity and awe (Harvey & Karrow, 2016), although difficult, was liberating. Stepping back from the urge of assimilating the other (the flower) into the self (subject) was significant in its own right. I wondered, could mystery persist beyond a sense of denial?

Critique of Mystery as Denial

The non-religious domain experienced through the scientific realm may result in a sense of mystery as denial (Figure 2). This sense of mystery represents a position along a spectrum of senses of mystery. Rooted in the Enlightenment and the disciplines of rationalist philosophy and empirical science, most modern efforts directed toward understanding reality have been compelled to eradicate mystery. With Enlightenment, mysteries came to be viewed as problems that, given enough time, could be solved either through rationalism or empiricism. As a scientist and science educator

[8] For a detailed tracing and description of the various sense of mystery, see Karrow and Harvey (2015).

this was the initial sense of mystery I experienced during the encounter with the unknown flower. There was a desire and determination to immediately identify the unknown flower. Returning to our opening question, *Why the denial of mystery*?, the simple answer is, we live during a metaphysical epoch preoccupied with presence (Figure 2). When metaphysics as presence obscures metaphysics as *physis* (which preserves and maintains metaphysics as absence), mystery is effaced. To fit the mystery of the strange flower into my understandings of all wildflowers on our farm was my default inclination. Fortunately, heeding Heidegger's caution, I listened and discovered that other senses of mystery exist and that I could cultivate a receptivity to mystery rather than denying it.

Receptivity to Other Senses of Mystery

The typology of senses of mystery, described above and in Figure 2, reveals other attitudes toward the phenomenon of mystery. For instance, an aesthetic sense of mystery draws from beauty, from the emotional responses that beauty provokes, such as wonder, curiosity and awe, and from specific attributes of materials and form that lend beauty, including "proportion", "order", "harmony or symmetry", "unity", "integrity and perfection", "clarity" and "radiance" (Verkamp, 1997, pp. 24-35; see also Harvey & Karrow, 2016, Figure 2). Whereas the deniers of mystery claim to "demystify" it, a sense of mystery as aesthetics moves beyond mere problem solving to embrace and celebrate the rationality of the universe that makes the solution to problems possible in the first place. Another example of a non-religious sense of mystery is a skeptical sense of mystery. This sense is the product of the realization that one's dependency on rationality and experience is limited. The objective of a skeptical sense of mystery is to use philosophical metaphysics to cast a skeptical cloud over mystery. Mystery then, is not simply diminished through "denial" nor elevated through "aesthetics," rather, mystery is cast with aspersion. Through these senses of mystery, we expose certain epistemological foundations. Mystery as denial, fostered through the sciences and mathematics, is founded on epistemologies of rationalism and empiricism. Mystery as aesthetics, fostered through the arts, by contrast, is founded on an epistemology of rationalism. Mystery as skepticism, reinforced through certain brands of analytical philosophy, is founded on an epistemology of doubt. The remaining senses of mystery, experienced through the religious domain, fostered through various theologies (spiritualities and religions), feature epistemologies of intuition and revelation (Figure 2; see also Karrow & Harvey, 2023).

Aesthetic and skeptical senses of mystery both offer more flexible relationships between our understandings of reality and mystery. This is in contrast to the religious domain of mystery (Figure 2) where senses of mystery are commonly nurtured and venerated. Our intent here is to point to the availability of these other senses of mystery, the fascinating relationships they share with their respective domains (non-religious vs. religious), their epistemological biases (theological, philosophical and scientific realms of experience), and the corresponding ontological foundations of which they are expressions (framed by metaphysics as presence or *physis*; Figure 2). Being aware of other senses of mystery supports self-reflection, exposing biases in our attitude(s) toward mystery, while expanding our openness and receptivity to experiences with mystery.

Period C: Contemporary Years— How May Receptivity to Mystery Inform Curriculum Theory?

(Doug Karrow and Sharon Harvey)

Thus far in this inquiry, we have illuminated the importance of mystery (its ontological and epistemological contours) and exposed ways to remain receptive to it, namely, by being aware of what mystery is, why it has been viewed with distain (by a metaphysics as presence), and that we have access to other senses of mystery (e.g., aesthetic, skeptical and reverential). Such awareness can help us understand that during our contemporary era, our social institutions (such as education) have generally perpetuated a negative attitude toward mystery, and that this need not be the case. Awareness and realization are one thing; actual strategies to nurture mystery are another. It should be acknowledged that some, such as Cooper (2002, 2018), have argued that experiences of mystery (remaining open to mystery) may be nurtured through various "comportments", including universal compassion, "coping-with" and humility, as well as through first-hand immediate experiences with animals, listening to music, walking or tending a garden (Cooper, 2018). While these are beyond examination here, we encourage the reader to consult these works and our own work (Karrow & Harvey, 2023; Karrow & Harvey, 2024; Karrow & Harvey, forthcoming).

In the contexts of our work in post-secondary settings and this special issue, we wonder how receptivity to mystery might inform curriculum theory. Receptivity to mystery is consistent with Heidegger's general conception of education as satisfying two aims. According to Hodge (2015), Heidegger's discussions on this topic suggests that while the first aim of education is to induct learners into the metaphysical system in play, to learn about the existence into which they are thrown, and to learn about established ways of understanding this existence, the second aim of education should be to move beyond this instruction to interrogate the metaphysics on which it is grounded. Essentially, in this ontological curriculum, the first aim of education is about educating in a fashion consistent with metaphysics as presence, while the latter aim is about exposing students to various metaphysical systems, so that they have the capability to personally question what the nature of being is.

What might Heidegger's conception of education in the field of curriculum studies look like? As we teach in professional and undergraduate programs, we adopt Petrina's (2004) simple yet functional operationalization of curriculum as that which considers the questions, *What should be learned?* And, *How it should be taught?* Focusing on the first question, we leave the second question for future work. Considering the first question, "What should be learned?", the answer is simple: through the first aim of Heidegger's conception of education, curriculum is the medium to which learners are inducted into metaphysics as presence. Of course, we see that such a curriculum is problematic from a Heideggerian perspective (Hodge, 2015), in that forcing generations of students to adopt metaphysics as presence (this way of being) immediately consigns them to repeat what Heidegger refers to as the forgetfulness of being (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Such forgetfulness results in the inability of students to understand the problems of their current induction into metaphysics as presence: namely, how it exhausts opportunities and access to other metaphysical systems, in

particular, metaphysics as *physis* (presence and absence) and the preservation of mystery, while reinforcing metaphysics as presence and its harmful effects (Karrow et al., 2019; Karrow & Harvey, 2023). Yet, Heidegger's conception of education involves a second aim. By guiding students in their learning to recognize metaphysics as presence and then awakening them to metaphysics as *physis*, that metaphysical system that preserves the enigma of mystery through conjoined ontological movements of presencing and absencing, the curriculum is rendered worthwhile.

Still, one may ask why, why receptivity to mystery and why through the ontological curriculum? (What is the existential significance of mystery that renders it essential to curriculum studies?) Without mystery, we believe that humans and more-than-humans (Abram, 1997) are increasingly consigned to live in a world where the nature of being is continual presencing. And as we have outlined, such unrelenting presencing is problematic because it creates a human world that conceives of existence as a resource, that is, nature as increasingly exploited. Thus, humans are unable to view the world, themselves and the more-than-humans as anything other than human contrivances. Such raw humanism, a view of reality that posits humans as sole conferrers of their outlook and understanding of the world, is a product of our hubris—of an inability to view and understand the world beyond humanity. As portrayed in Frye's (1980) convincing metaphor, an all-consuming "cultural envelope" (p. 21) has completely separated humans from the world; we are self-segregated beings. In contrast to humanism, another ideal view of reality can bring this into check (Cooper, 2002). This view is historically referred to as absolutism, and its view of reality posits that the world exists beyond human contribution. However, can we accept that such a world exists without humanity? We note that the two positions—humanism and absolutism—while not contradictory, are contrary: they cannot both be true, though both may be false. However, such contrariness may be obviated through a receptivity to mystery that results in a worldview where one accepts that on the one hand, there is no world possible without humanity, while also recognizing there is a world beyond our comprehension; quite simply, it is ineffable (Cooper, 2002). The implications for curriculum theory here are significant. Curriculum theory, defined as determinations of "what should be learned" (Petrina, 2004), can be expanded beyond the learner's epistemological inculcations, towards those more ontological. Unless our ontological presuppositions are examined through curriculum, the essence of humanity, the freedom to be human and the freedom for more-than-humans to be more-than-human become exhausted. Witness the surrender of nature and the more-than-human to human will and the resulting ecological catastrophe we face, the disintegration of our social institutions to human self-interest and the accompanying political upheaval and chaos, and ultimately, the ontological forfeiture of human being to technological power and capitalistic greed (e.g., AI and humanoid robotics). Curriculum theory re-oriented to the ontological is an imperative demanding the attention of scholars, theorists, educators and practitioners.

Discussion

Summation

We believe that a distain for mystery in our lives would be akin to losing our humility (Jardine, 1998; Cooper, 2002), just as ignoring our ecological relationship with the Earth would be akin to

losing our humanity. The first period of our research elucidated core existential experiences within the sylvan fringe, revealing the phenomenon of mystery, and beginning to address the first research question, *What is mystery?* Inspired by Heidegger's (1927/1962; 1959/1966) critique of modern metaphysics, as parsed by Caputo (1986), we learned that mystery is the enigma of the counterplay between metaphysics as presence and absence, or, as Nicholson (2019) puts it, mystery is "something in some way known but that hides its truth" (p. 67). To remain receptive to mystery, the case was made for resuscitating metaphysics as *physis* as it preserves presence *and* absence. The second period of this research led to a collaboration exploring the second research question: *Why distain for mystery?* Two extensive literature reviews into senses of mystery (Figure 2) revealed the relationship mystery has with metaphysics, as well as its religious and non-religious domains, realms of experience (e.g., theology, philosophy and science), respective epistemological vantage points (e.g., revelation, rationalization and empiricism) and subject/object relationships. We learned that distain for mystery is a peculiar and dominating tendency in modern society, rooted deeply in metaphysics as presence, where the nature of being (ontology) is revealed through the character of technology, with forms of rationalism and empiricism as default epistemologies. Understanding that we have access to other senses of mystery—such as the aesthetic, skeptical, sacred, immanent and transcendental—increases our receptivity to mystery in general, through awareness of other ontological and epistemological perspectives. Turning our attention in the third period of our research to the question, *How may receptivity to mystery inform curriculum theory?,* we have ruminated on the curricular implications of this in the field of education. We stress that these are "ruminations", iterative excursions into what could inform further work; true to the metaphor of "rumination" with time, some of these ideas will be fruitful, others less so. Receptivity to mystery should strike at the heart of our conception of education, particularly a conception of education that orients itself to the education of future generations regarding the nature of being (Harvey et al., 2017). In doing so, education answers the curricular question, "What should be learned?". A conception of education oriented to the nature of being is ontological and the curriculum it supports is an *ontological curriculum*. That is, education supported through said ontological curriculum should concern itself with the joint tasks of revealing what is problematic about metaphysics as presence while also revealing how metaphysics as *physis* could instill and nurture an open receptivity to mystery. The gift of mystery and our receptivity toward it could enhance and expand traditional curriculum orientations (Schubert, 1986)[9] and curriculum theory, writ large.

Conclusions

There are several conclusions we draw from our research. Firstly, natural ecologies hold rich opportunities for existential interpretive inquiry. Metaphysics (ontology) and epistemology each shape understandings of mystery, how it may be experienced, defined and conceptualized. Mystery can be described as a phenomenon involving "secrecy" and "incomprehensibility"; conceptually, according to Heidegger (1959/1966), mystery as a phenomenon is "something that shows itself *and*

[9] Beyond examination in this work, Schubert's (1986) curricular orientations include: *intellectual-traditionalist, social-behaviourist* and *experientialist* approaches.

at the same time withdraws" (p. 55), or as Caputo (1986) adds, mystery is the enigma of the counterplay between the ontological movements of presencing and absencing (p. 83). The multiple senses of mystery—denial, aesthetics, skepticism, sacred, immanent and transcendent—are derived from various epistemologies (e.g., science, metaphysics, theology), presupposed by various ontologies (e.g., metaphysics as presence vs. metaphysics as *physis*). Receptivity to mystery can be supported through various means, including an awareness of mystery itself and its wholesale denial in the modern world, through access to other senses of mystery beyond "denial" to, for example, senses of mystery as "aesthetic" and/or "skeptical", and through various comportments, such as humility. Finally, receptivity to mystery may inform curriculum theory by addressing the question of "What should be learned?"—and in doing so supporting a conception of education that seeks to allow students to uncover metaphysics as presence, while in that uncovering to preserve metaphysics as *physis*.

Implications and Future Research

We envision a significant implication for our work. Namely, we see its potential to expand and enhance curriculum theory, for example, Schubert's (1986) curricular orientations, while addressing Petrina's (2004) second curriculum question, "How shall it [i.e., curriculum] be taught?". This may occur by exploring further a receptivity to mystery, by fostering an educational space to develop and cultivate humility, among other comportments, such as *poetizing* (see Harvey & Karrow, this issue), all the while considering and furthering a concurrent project developing a philosophy of education (*poetism*) and the implications this may have for education theory and practice (see Karrow & Harvey, forthcoming).

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